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THE SECOND PARTHIAN OSTRACON FROM QŪMIS (QŪMIS COMMENTARIES NO. 3)¹

By A. D. H. Bivar

During the 1976 season of excavations at Shahr-i Qūmis, a second Parthian ostracon was discovered, both more complete, and better preserved, than that unearthed in 1967.² Its find-spot, as will appear from the report currently in preparation by the excavators, lay some hundreds of yards north of that of the first specimen at Site VII; yet we shall see that the new ostracon belongs to the same archive as its predecessor. The writer is grateful to the excavators, John Hansman and David Stronach, for once again entrusting him with the publication of the find. The contents rather comfortably supplement the readings offered for the earlier find in 1970. It is moreover agreeable that it appears to contain a date. With these preliminaries, we may turn at once to an examination of the text (Pl. 1a):

<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1 . . . Tyryn 1	. . . Tīrēn 1,
2 Humyk 1 'spbrk 1	Hūmayak 1, Aspabarak 1,
3 LBRYLBRY Tyryn	. . . to the grandson of Tīrēn
4 - - - iC/ xx xx xx x	- - - 1] 70

The document contains once more a list of personal names. Each of the first three is followed by a numeral, in every case the single unit. It is therefore evident that we have to do with exactly the same type of transaction as on the earlier specimen. What that may be is not explicitly stated. The document is at any rate not one of the standard “wine” series—of which, thanks to the labours of Professors Diakonoff and Livshits,³ many variants are now available for comparison. Conceivably it might represent an unfamiliar, abbreviated, form of such a document. Yet it seems rather that we have here a simple list of contributions, in some unspecified commodity or currency, at the rate of one item from, or to, each of the persons named. We may note that line 3 offers something of a surprise in containing the long ideogram *BRYLBRY* “grandson”. This form was found in the Parthian version of Shāpūr’s KZ inscription;⁴ but not hitherto, so it seems, in earlier Parthian. However, it appears that it was to this grandson, or more exactly perhaps, *through* his agency, that the contributions in question were made.

The foregoing remarks were drafted after the study of the black-and-white photograph accompanying this article. Soon afterwards, however, the excavators kindly sent a colour transparency for study, and from this a rather curious point arose. The tall vertical line in the centre of the ideogram of line 3, where the black-and-white strongly conveys the impression of a *lāmed*, appears in the colour-photograph quite different in tint and consistency from the remainder of the inscription; so that it is possible to take it for an accidental discolouration, and thus to be disregarded for the purposes of the decipherment. If that is so, the group in question should read, not *BRYLBRY* “grandson”, but *BRTBRY* “grand-daughter”. Yet the mention of a female participant in this transaction is rather unexpected, since all the other persons named appear to be male. On the other hand, the second solution has the advantage that it avoids assuming the occurrence of the late form of the ideogram, *BRYLBRY* for *BRYBRY*, in this evidently early text. The writer recalls that during his first quick examination of the original in Tehran, he had been inclined to read *LBRTBRY* without any hesitation.

The last line evidently contains a high numeral. At first sight, it should not be less than 70, but it is preceded by a rather uncertain character. If this were ligatured to the sign following, to form a rather mis-shapen letter *het* (𐭪), one could imagine that it represented the abbreviation for *hmr* “(measures) of wine”. The ciphers following might then add up to 50. Yet that is improbable. For if the total of entries in the document were so high, the complete ostracon would necessarily have carried some 25 lines of writing, which would make it extraordinarily large. On the other hand, if the final

numeral were merely the straight total of entries, without any designation of a commodity, it would read as 70. This is even less likely, since the space required would be greater. A more attractive solution seems to be that of assuming it to be a date.

Parthian ostraca regularly close with the date, so that is to be expected. It seems clear that we could have three ciphers for 20, followed by that for 10—the latter consisting of a horizontal stroke. The outline which precedes all these is far less obvious, and moreover fragmentary. That it could represent the indicator for “hundreds” is evidently possible. Yet the shape does not conform too closely with the sign for “hundreds” in the Nisa documents (A), so that we should need to make some allowance for local variation. The digits which should precede the mark in question are missing at the break, but if this theory is correct the likeliest restoration is to assume the reading [iC] for “one hundred”. Such relatively bold, and well-formed, script, is more typical of the first century B.C. than later. Therefore, if all the above reasoning is correct, the date is 170 of the Arsacid Era. The conversion is $248 - 170 = 78$ B.C. This tallies well with evidence for the other example at Site VII, which must now be considered (Pl. Ib). Since the transaction was, from the character of the date, of a type that occurred once a year, one might guess that it was actually a tax payment. One could speculate, even if it be no more than a speculation, that the units designated were actually some variety of coin, presumably therefore Parthian drachmae.

The first Qūmis ostrakon was recovered, as the writer understands, in the upper layers of Site VII. In close proximity was found a hoard of seven Parthian silver drachmae. These drachmae were all of the variety designated by Sellwood as “Type 31”.⁵ The period to which they belong was a disturbed one. The sequence of issues, and the rulers to whom they should be attributed, are still the subject of great discussion. Currently the issues in question are most frequently ascribed to Orodes I (traditionally c. 80-77 B.C.). That is just the period of our new ostrakon. If such a dating were correct, we could begin to speculate that the seven coins found were the contributions of the seven persons named in the previously published ostrakon.

According, however, to the most recent analysis (which is based on Le Rider’s arrangement of the bronze coins of Susa),⁶ the last year of Orodes I and of “Type 31” was 83/2 B.C. On this reckoning there followed a gap which accommodated two “Unknown Kings”.⁷ Whatever may be the facts concerning this interregnum, the next major watershed of Parthian history came in 78/77 B.C. It was the advent of the inspired octogenarian Sinatruces, and his rough Scythian levies, who restored, for no less than seven years in his own person, the rightful Arsacid line. On our reading offered here, it is to the year preceding that last mentioned that the new ostrakon should belong. It is anyway not more than 5 years removed from the coin-find of Site VII; and we shall see that it mentions three of the same individuals as the first ostrakon, which turned up close to the coins.

We come finally to the personal names in the documents. Of the 7 names fully, or partly, visible in the first Qūmis ostrakon (Pl. Ib) no less than three are mentioned in the new find. Two, which were there mutilated, are here legible in every character. Where, in line 4 of the earlier document, we hesitatingly suggested the restoration [Hw]myk (based on a reading of Nisa), here, one could contend, that name can be seen spelt out in full. The Soviet scholars note that it would represent the diminutive of the well-known epic name Hūmay, viz. Hūmayak.⁸ Where, in line 2 of that document, we mentioned, without finally accepting, a possible reading 'spbrk (Aspabārak), here we see each character of that name plainly legible. Those portions of the earlier document can thus be confidently restored. The first name of the earlier ostrakon, Tyryn (Tīrēn), re-occurs once in full; and has been restored, with less than total certainty, at the upper edge.

The discovery of the second Qūmis ostrakon points a moral which is possibly worth stating. A single, mutilated, Parthian ostrakon is, one may fairly say, amongst the most forbidding of epigraphic documents. Yet such texts repeat and reinforce each other. Seen as part of an extensive archive, with sound portions *here* supplementing sections *there* defaced; with the sequence of events, the nature of the transactions, and the relationship of the participants all emerging from the assembly of cumulative evidence, we can progress from the driest bones of history to a living picture of individuals and national events.⁹

For the epigraphist, the second ostrakon from Qūmis is satisfying because it confirms, and



Pl. Ia. The ostracon found in 1976 at Shahr-i Qūmis (scale of centimetres)



Pl. Ib. The ostracon found in 1969 at Shahr-i Qūmis (scale of centimetres)

completes, several readings doubtful in the first. The historian will always be glad to have an exact date, 78 B.C., which probably marks the end of a cultural phase. For the humanist there is surely a grain of merit, amid to-day's flurry of scientific abstractions, in appreciating that he has made the acquaintance of real people, who played some part, however humble, in the silent decades that recently were called the "Parthian Dark Age".

The archaeologist has to be concerned with another problem. These two scraps of evidence will not represent the whole story. They are surely part of a more extensive archive, scattered perhaps, or hidden below the surface, which could tell a fuller story of these transactions, and of those who took part in them, perhaps over a decade, or even half a century. That record it is the task of the future to reveal.

Appendix: the Tureng Tepe ostrakon

During the excavations in 1975 at Tureng Tepe, near Gurgan, an ostrakon was found in Level VB—that characterized as "Période hellénistique et le début de l'époque parthe".¹⁰ The sherd carries an inscription of 14 characters, and is described as "araméenne" or "Partho-araméenne". In fact, of the characters visible on the plate, 9 are numerals; and of the remaining 5, only one is diagnostic as between Aramaic and Parthian, of which scripts the majority of the corresponding characters are nearly identical. The significant character is the first, seemingly a Parthian *pē*. Moreover the content of the inscription resembles that of known Parthian ostraca. Short though it is, this text belongs to the well known "wine series". It can be read as follows:

[MN pt]pr H(MR) M(RY) iii iii k(*apīč*) iii

"From the store, of wine, 6 *mari*, 3 *kapīč*"

The formula is of a class well known from the Nisa documents, which relates to the topping-up of depleted, or possibly evaporated, jars with wine from stock.¹¹ Concerning the quantity implied by the *mari* (Gk. μάρης) some confusion exists in the Classical sources. By Hallock¹² it was reckoned as a measure of 9.28 litres, which may seem unexpectedly large. The smaller subdivision, the *kapīč* (Gk. καπίθη), is also somewhat debatable. Polyaeus¹³ asserts that it corresponded to the Attic *choenix*. If indeed it was the liquid equivalent of the Achaemenid *hofan*, or Babylonian *QA* (which are the dry measures approximating to the *choenix*), its value would be 0.93 litre, thus a tenth of Hallock's value for the *mari*. In the Nisa documents, however, as in the present text, the number of *kapīč* cited never exceed 3, and seldom fall short of that figure; whereas, if they were tenths of the higher denomination, one would expect larger numbers. Thus it is possible to prefer the opinion of Xenophon,¹⁴ who equated the *kapithē* (*kapīč*) with two *choenices*, and consequently a fifth of the *mari*. Alternatively, one may reject the conclusion of Hallock, and deduce that in reality the *mari* was equivalent to 6 *kapīč* of 0.93 litre, or 5.58 litres, a value which on general grounds seems less extreme. Then 3 *kapīč* would constitute a half *mari*.

To the final resolution of the above problem, further studies of the ostraca will naturally contribute. Our purpose however here in inspecting the Tureng Tepe ostrakon is to ascertain how far it may be related to the examples from Qūmis. Although we see that it is probably in Parthian, it definitely belongs to a well known class of the "wine-series", and has analogies at Nisa. This at the same time emphasizes the individuality of the Qūmis ostraca, and the distinct nature of the transactions to which they refer.

¹ This paper is the third of a series of short notes on material from the Qūmis excavations. The others are as follows. (1) "The first Parthian ostrakon from Iran", *JRAS* 1970, 63-6; (2) "Āpapāta (Qūmis commentaries no. 2)", *JRAS* 1972, 119-24. An additional item, "The Sasanian coin from Qūmis", printed as an appendix to John Hansman and David Stronach, "A Sasanian repository at Shahr-i Qūmis", *JRAS* 1970, 143-55, was not separately numbered.

² "The first Parthian ostrakon".

³ See now I. M. Diakonoff and V. A. Livshits, *Parthian economic documents from Nisa*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Pt. II, Vol. II (London 1976—in progress).

⁴ cf. Ph. Gignoux, *Glossaire des inscriptions pehlevies et parthes*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Supplementary series I (London 1972), 49. It seems from I. M. Diakonoff and V. A. Livshits, *Dokumenti iz Nisi* (Moscow 1960), 40, that the form *BRYLBRY* was not attested at Nisa.

⁵ D. G. Sellwood, "The drachms of the Parthian 'Dark Age'", *JRAS* 1976, 7.

⁶ G. Le Rider, *Suse sous les Seleucides et les Parthes* (Paris 1965), 351.

⁷ Sellwood, 10.

⁸ *Dokumenti iz Nisi*, 24.

⁹ A similar observation was made concerning the Elamite tablets from Persepolis by Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis fortification tablets*

(Chicago 1969), 3: "The individual fortification texts do not, as a rule, convey very much immediately useful information. In the first place it is often impossible even to read them without the help of close parallels. For example, no connected sense could be made from Scheil's transliteration of the single Achaemenid administrative text from Susa; but now, with the help of parallels, it is possible to transliterate almost every sign with assurance and offer a complete translation".

¹⁰ Jean Deshayes, "Tureng Tépé" in "Survey of Excavations", *Iran* XIV (1976), 170-1 and Pl. II; *idem*, "Rapport préliminaire sur la onzième campagne de fouille à Torang Tappah", in Firouz Bagherzadeh (ed.), *Proceedings of the IVth Annual Symposium on Archaeological Research in Iran, Muzeh-e Iran-e Bāstān, Tehran, Iran, 3rd-8th November 1975* (Tehran 1976), 307 and n. 20. When draft-

ing the present note, the present writer had not seen Professor M. Sznycer's readings of the ostrakon in the above footnote, which in fact coincide with his own in the clearer portions. However, that account does not restore the commencement, nor, despite the cautious and appropriate words "qui évoque ceux de Nisa", does it set the inscription unequivocally in context, so that the above discussion still seems justified. Professor Sznycer's terminology is of course conditioned by the fact that he regards Parthian inscriptions as conveying Aramaic rather than Parthian language.

¹¹ Diakonoff and Livshits, *Parthian economic documents*, Texts 1, 55, no. 573 (239), l. 6 and *passim*.

¹² Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis fortification tablets*, 72-4

¹³ *Strategemata* IV, 3, 32.

¹⁴ *Anabasis* I, 5, 6.